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Tracing the Afterlife and Afterdeath of Transatlantic Slavery  
in Kimathi Donkor's *UK Diaspora* (2007)

Celeste-Marie Bernier

“When people think of enslavement often art is the last thing on anyone’s mind,” so declares Black British artist, Kimathi Donkor. While taking due note of the social, historical, and ideological forces integral to any investigation into transatlantic slavery as a centuries’ long practice for which “the facts and figures of shipping, economics, politics, and war” typically assume center-stage, Donkor remains insistent: “Art has a very important role in the way we can think about this history.” “One of the key ways the exploitation of forced labor was laundered was through the creation of works of art often to glorify the very people that had been involved in the atrocities,” he observes, refusing to shy away from the stark reality that the “Profits of slave-trading and slavery resulted in money spent commissioning art works that ended up on walls and in the very architecture itself.”<sup>1</sup> A politically radical and aesthetically experimental painter and mixed-media assemblage artist, Donkor’s hard-hitting subject-matter comes to life via a multifaceted use of mythology, symbolism, and allegory. All too aware of the ways in which a history of transatlantic slavery provided the capital that galvanized white Western art systems of patronage, collection, and exhibition into existence, Donkor’s bodies of work assume center-stage in powerful relation to centuries’ long traditions of official art history in general and European portraiture in particular.<sup>2</sup> Working to expose the ways in which nationally sanctioned and officially commissioned portraits of white monarchical rulers and political leaders typically exalted in their subjects as the visual embodiments of Christian beliefs, civilized culture, and capital accumulation in the service of a society that was for whites only, his mixed-media assemblages and paintings vouchsafe his commitment to representing black women, men, and children as the appropriate subjects of fine art at the same time that

he remains dedicated to restoring the history of the transatlantic trade as fundamental to European art history.

As a painter and mixed-media assemblage artist who has not only traveled widely throughout Africa, the Caribbean, and South America but whose personal history comes to life in the tessellated relationships produced by “family connections in Jamaica, Zambia, Nigeria and Ghana,” for Donkor the onus is upon doing justice to black lives as lived across national, social, political, and cultural divides and yet repeatedly considered beyond the pale of Western art traditions no less than official history and national memory.<sup>3</sup> Cutting to the heart of the afterlife and afterdeath of transatlantic slavery in the historic and ongoing displacements, dislocations, and dispersals confronting black peoples across the diaspora, Donkor was inspired to create his mixed-media assemblage *UK Diaspora* (2007) in the eye of the storm regarding nation wide-commemorations of the two hundred year anniversary of abolitionism in Britain in 2007. Recognizing that the “British state was going to make a strong effort to aggrandize itself,” his works betray his determination to “counteract what I knew would be nationalistic and jingoistic and backslapping,” as he sought to expose national strategies of memorialization that remain invested in a politicisation of history and which have enduring implications for race and class dynamics in contemporary society.<sup>4</sup> At war against the ideological and aesthetic stranglehold exerted by a white Western art historical tradition, Donkor’s *UK Diaspora* bears witness to his no-holds-barred exploration of the inhumanity of the trade and of the role officially sanctioned artworks continue to play in perpetuating national amnesia by simultaneously whitewashing transatlantic slavery and art by black peoples out of existence. Black agency over and above white atrocity ultimately remains the defining feature of Donkor’s oeuvre in his determination to extrapolate the lived realities of black diasporic subjects, both enslaved and free, and who were themselves engaged – regardless of their subjection to physical, psychological, and imaginative annihilation - in acts and arts of social, political, and artistic liberation.

Taking inspiration from Toni Morrison's denunciation of the failures of literary language to grapple with slavery as encapsulated at the end of her novel, *Beloved*, in the powerful admission, "It was not a story to pass on," Donkor's bodies of work in general and *UK Diaspora* in particular attest to the fact that the history of slavery "was not an image to pass on" as far as dominant white western visual cultures are concerned.<sup>5</sup> Working to develop an alternative visual language out of political necessity and artistic design, Donkor's bodies of work attest to a protest aesthetic as variously characterized by direct visual quoting, repetition with variation, appropriation, call and response, improvisation, and mythological reimagining to reimagine in order to provide philosophical meditations upon the shifting relationships between black and white histories, narratives, and memory. A stark departure from his epic-sized history paintings in which he dramatizes archetypal black freedom-fighters - including, *Toussaint Louverture at Bedourete* (2004), *Kombi Continua (Scenes from the life of Njinga Mbandi)* (2010), *Nanny's fifth act of mercy* (2012), *Yaa Asantewaa inspecting the dispositions at Ejisu* (2012), and *Harriet Tubman en route to Canada* (2012) - Donkor's *UK Diaspora* similarly foregrounds an alternative visual language as composed of multiple classical references and modern allusions but for a different purpose. Across this mixed-media assemblage, he not only names and shames the slave-trading atrocities enacted by otherwise whitewashed western icons but comes to grips with the "stories" that were not "passed on." Dramatically to the fore within *UK Diaspora* are the lives of unrecorded and anonymous rather than monumental and iconographic individuals whose bodies and souls have circulated solely as absent presences and present absences within white official archives and the domain of art history. Simultaneously an artist, historian, storyteller, community griot, political activist, and educator, the catalyst for Donkor's *UK Diaspora* emerges from his conviction regarding the cause and effect relationship between the willful eradication of a history of slavery and white racist systems of discrimination in a contemporary era. Summarizing that there was "nothing in the British education system, particularly the art system, which spoke about this," he ascribes these lacunae as most likely "due to a sense of shame about Britain's involvement in slavery and I suppose what you might call an

institutional racism.”<sup>6</sup> Undaunted by the enduring force of either transatlantic slavery or “institutional racism,” as *UK Diaspora* demonstrates, Donkor ultimately interprets the incontestable reality that the canvas was an “object of trade in the same way that people had become objects of trade” as no source of despair but hope. At the heart of his aesthetic processes and revisionist vision lies a powerful reversal: he substitutes the “magic of trade” with the “magic” of art-making in a bid to transform “oppression into beauty and art.”<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of his status as an internationally leading figure in contemporary art history, Kimathi Donkor’s life and work remain vastly under-researched. While his paintings memorializing diasporic histories of black iconic heroism no less than his works commemorating black revolutionary activism in the face of physical and psychological discrimination and persecution as suffered in a contemporary era have been the subject of some scholarly attention, his *UK Diaspora* mixed-media assemblage has yet to be examined in any depth. As one of the founding figures of the BLK Art Group, in addition to his seminal role as a leading critic and theorist, Eddie Chambers paves the way for scholars by writing of Donkor’s aesthetic practice that, “He fearlessly tackles key, dramatic, monumental moments of African diaspora history,” noting, he “does so with a painterly preciseness that borders on aesthetic frugality.”<sup>8</sup> Chambers’s emphasis upon Donkor’s “aesthetic frugality” provides illuminating ways into his artistic practice as characterized by a highly charged use of metaphor, symbolism, and allegory and as resistant to excessive explication as he instead actively inscribes the viewer into his interpretative minimalism. “Striking for their overt political content, Donkor’s paintings provoke an uncomfortable pleasure,” Lara Pawson further comments as she celebrates his “riff on classical art” by which he interrogates “the myths and memories of European history from the Renaissance onwards” and thereby exposes the extent to which “Africans and the diaspora are perpetually being erased from history,” for which read not only social and political but also art history.<sup>9</sup> As a critic incisively examining Donkor’s multilayered practices, Coline Milliard declares, “Donkor is an enthusiastic sampler,” noting that his works represent “genuine cornucopias of interwoven reference: to Western art, social and political events, and to the artist’s own

biography.” Clearly, a self-reflexive determination to fuse historical, social, political, aesthetic, and autobiographical realities powerfully undergirds *UK Diaspora*. Yet, while Milliard insightfully draws attention to the fact that, “In his hands, history painting regains some of its power as a tool of commentary on the present,” any close examination of his multi-layered, multi-sourced, and multi-media visual lexicon complicates her emphasis that, “Donkor’s meticulous style verges at times on the pedagogical,” as she declares, “his message is as clear as the figures he depicts.”<sup>10</sup> However committed to social, political, and cultural consciousness-raising, Donkor’s aesthetic foregrounds formal and thematic ambiguity over and above didactic explication to encourage audiences to intellectual, philosophical, and aesthetic engagement. Directly addressing Donkor’s lifelong commitment to the “theme of representing and inventing black agency in visual mediums,” Philip Kaisary’s emphasis upon the artist’s dedication to the “issue of the representation of black empowerment and black victimhood” within his *Toussaint* series compellingly extrapolates his shifting constructions of black agency and activism across *UK Diaspora* and his bodies of work more generally.<sup>11</sup>

“*UK Diaspora* is a mixed-media assemblage created in 2007 in response to the bicentenary of Britain’s 1807 Act to Abolish the Slave Trade,” so Donkor writes in the artist’s iconographical notes accompanying the work, summarizing that it is “comprised of 10 dark-brown, mass-produced, budget canvases arranged to form a schematic map of the island of Great Britain” (see Figure 1). Working against a white Western art historical tradition of reifying the painting as a unique art object, Donkor’s decision to create the work on “dark brown, mass-produced, budget canvas” rather than expensive stretched white canvas foregrounds the extent to which, as an “object of trade,” the art object operates as a metonymic signifier of the expendability of black bodies bought and sold in slavery. He reinforces this view by stating, “The ten canvases have been pierced with hundreds of nails and screws driven into their stretcher frames,” on the grounds that, “The nail and screw motif references the tradition of Nkisi Nkondi, a sacred BaKongo ceremony of purification, chastisement and healing in which, a minister impales a ceremonial carving with iron implements, including nails, screws, plough blades and knife blades as an

accompaniment of prayers requesting divine/ancestral intervention.” As talismanic surrogates for black bodies, Donkor’s pierced canvases on which he creates dramatic tableaux not only viscerally, spiritually, and imaginatively extrapolate the survival of black diasporic cultural traditions, regardless of the living death that was transatlantic slavery, but testify to the shifting realities of black strategies of resistance as simultaneously encompassing cultural radicalism, physical martyrdom, and traumatic rupture. Writing that “the motif has the triple effect of visually framing each canvas, re-stating the Nkisi-Nkondi tradition and physically ‘attacking’ the canvas,” Donkor foregrounds his use of this diasporic practice as a radical intervention into the parameters of dominant art history and of the necessity of the black artist’s engagement in a process of destroying to create and creating destroy with regard to mainstream iconographic traditions, a subject extensively examined by theorists such as Robert Farris Thompson and artists including Renee Stout and David Hammons.<sup>12</sup> In a bold departure from his epic-sized works typically consisting solely of painterly brushstrokes, as Donkor explains, *UK Diaspora* comes to life from a variety of “materials” that “include photographs from the artist’s research trips around the ‘Black Atlantic,’ as well as original oil-paintings, digital prints of archival material and everyday objects such as Ghanaian Cedis, Cuban Pesos, US Dollars, tickets, sweets, Ghanaian sand, the artist’s own hair and manufactured toys.” For Donkor, the act of inscribing actual objects over and above their representation was integral to his aesthetic practice as he sought to extrapolate the material realities of lives as lived in the black diaspora and as filtered through an explicitly autobiographical lens. Working in call and response relation to his evocation of the Nkisi traditions, Donkor’s explanation that, “the everyday objects memorialize the artist’s 2006 encounter with Santeria shrines in Santiago de Cuba, which also deploy images, objects and figurines in ceremonies of sacred commune with the divine/ancestors,” reveals his commitment to developing a multilayered and multinational aesthetic in order to extrapolate the otherwise invisibilized imaginative inner lives of black women, men, and children. Working with myth, spirituality, and symbolism, he cuts to the heart of a gamut of black resistance strategies as writ large in the unrecorded family oral histories, community memories, and storytelling traditions of transatlantic slavery.

Defying the boundaries of white Western art history, he further combines his investigation into Nkisi and Santeria with an exploration of European traditions of painterly likenesses by “reproducing portraits of well-known people associated with the English slaving industry.” For Donkor, this tripartite aesthetic bolsters his conviction regarding the ways in which the “three sacred visual traditions - Nkisi, Santeria and Portraiture - interact in a ‘triangular trade’ of artistic forms.” Self-reflexively intermixing the “triangular trade” of African, African Caribbean, and European “artistic forms” with the “triangular trade” in bodies and souls, he relies upon the expendability of his aesthetically experimental mixed-media assemblage to denounce the worthlessness of human life during slavery. “It was originally conceived that the ‘Diaspora’ of the title might be fulfilled by each piece being sold separately and hence dispersed,” he emphasizes as he envisions the sale of his assemblage as replicating the loss and suffering experienced by black bodies during slavery.<sup>13</sup> Defying the role of the detached observer yet further, Donkor heightens the emotional drama and contemporary relevance of slavery’s legacies within *UK Diaspora* by physically, materially, and imaginatively inscribing his own life story into his works. “In terms of my own personal biography, my own being in the world it’s not just looking back on something as an abstract history,” he declares, observing, “my personal history or my family’s personal histories and the many people I know the community have this very strong sense of being part of this oceanic world and diaspora.”<sup>14</sup>

Assuming center-stage in *UK Diaspora* is Donkor’s self-reflexive reworking of Gilbert Stuart’s 1796 portrait of George Washington in his satirically titled painting, *Ran Away by George* (Figure 2). In stark contrast to Stuart’s original portrait in which Washington appears against a plain background and unencumbered by worldly possessions or decorative adornments with the exception of an ornate neck-tie, Donkor opts for an aesthetic practice of excessive layering to introduce physical artifacts fundamental to his revisionist symbolic and allegorical lexicon. He generates heightened dramatic tension not only by relying upon jagged brushstrokes to challenge Washington’s benign expression as per Stuart’s imagining and introduce psychological complexity but by juxtaposing a close up of this white iconic president’s physiognomy with “a digital reprint of George Washington’s 1761 local newspaper advertisement



offering rewards for the recapture of enslaved men who had escaped from his ‘plantation.’” Damning Washington by his own testimony, Donkor foregrounds a slippery relationship between text and image by including this advertisement which appeared in the *Maryland Gazette* on August 20 1761 and in which he offered “Forty Shillings Reward” for the apprehension of four enslaved black men, each of whom are identified solely by their first names: Peros, Jack, Neptune, and Cupid.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of their incarceration within the living death of transatlantic slavery as they simultaneously appear and disappear in a document written not to record black lives but to preserve white property interests, the individual identities of Peros, Jack, Neptune and Cupid nonetheless bleed through. As a consultation of the original document reveals, Washington’s descriptions go far beyond itemizations of physical appearance to testify to issues related to language, cultural adornment, and national identity as he writes Peros’s “Speech is something slow and broken,” Jack has “Cuts down each cheek, being his Country Marks,” Neptune possesses “Teeth stragling and fil’d sharp, his Back, if rightly remember’d, has many small Marks or Dots,” while he goes so far as to admit that Neptune and Cupid were “bought from an *African Ship* in *August 1759*.” Far more incendiary, however, is Washington’s admission that these four men “went off without the least Suspicion, Provocation, or Difference with any Body, or the least angry Word or Abuse from their Overseers,” a fact which, while from a white slaveholding perspective, reinforces a sense of outrage at the men’s seemingly unprovoked actions, from a black enslaved standpoint reveals their revolutionary commitment to the war for liberty as motivated not by personal grievance but idealized principle. Donkor’s decision to overlay the advertisement with six black chains simultaneously succeeds in visibilizing white American hypocrisy - “the gaps between them on the text produce the ‘13 stripes’ of the star-spangled banner” - and invisibilizing black history as he ensures that viewers can only obtain an in-depth understanding of these black men’s lives by taking the initiative to obtain copies of the original document for themselves.<sup>16</sup> Dramatically to the fore is Donkor’s indictment of white acts of atrocity – the signature “GEORGE WASHINGTON” is unobstructed from view – as he foregrounds the extent to which the “propagandistic” role of white official portraiture in sanitizing the realities of transatlantic slavery

remains far from over. As he declares, the “suppression of the truth about slavery is not something to do with history and the past but... is taking place today” via the dual forces of a widespread whitewashing and the ongoing stranglehold of racism’s “discriminatory abusive power.”<sup>17</sup> Interrogating the boundaries between fine art and corporate capitalism, Donkor extends his social and political critique of Washington’s symbolism via the “power of veneration” and “of literally being an icon” by opting to work, not with any painted portrait, but with the likeness that specifically became the “image that adorns the U.S. one dollar note,” a reality he renders physically palpable following his decision to use this currency to recreate Washington’s necktie.<sup>18</sup> Betraying his politicized convictions, Donkor juxtaposes Gilbert’s historical portrait and the runaway slave advertisement with twentieth and twenty-first century emblems of global capital to insist on slavery’s “contemporary echoes.”<sup>19</sup> Working across the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, he includes the IPOD as “the ultimate symbol of American capitalism” alongside cotton wool and cigars as emblems of plantations at the same time that he relies upon a toy police car as an icon of white racist authority. For Donkor “strong symbolic resonance and relationships” between the history of the transatlantic trade and contemporary injustices are caused not only by trafficking in peoples as “objects of trade” but in ongoing legal, social, political, and cultural forces of black disenfranchisement.<sup>20</sup>

Working to bring the atrocities of transatlantic slavery much closer to home, Donkor’s *Elizabeth Rex Lives* (Figure 3) appears immediately beneath *Ran Away by George* and occupies the geographical heartland of England within *UK Diaspora*. Naming and shaming acts of atrocity perpetuated by British monarchical rule and aristocratic privilege, his reworking of Nicholas Hilliard’s portrait in oils of Elizabeth I (c. 1575), is flanked on either side by two further paintings: *Arise Sir John*, his oil-painted copy of a portrait (1581, Anon.) of Sir John Hawkins (Figure 4), and *Drake-u-Liar*, another reworking of an anonymous likeness created the year previously (c. 1580, Anon.) of Sir Francis Drake (Figure 5). Assuming center-stage, Donkor’s portrait of Elizabeth I bears witness to his conviction that, “I don’t accept this notion by apologists that slavery’s in the past.” He exposes the “propagandistic function” of

Hilliard's original portrait by admitting to the radical decision to replace the white Tudor flowers on her dress with "images of cinema actors who have played the queen" as he condemns the fact that, in the case of Elizabeth I in particular, a vast financial sum has been invested in filmic adaptations with the result that "none mention her role in initiating the slave trade." For Donkor, these omissions are symptomatic of an ongoing determination not only to whitewash but to "mask" British historical realities to ensure that, "The role of African and indigenous American people is erased and replaced with white British heroines and heroes."<sup>21</sup> Pulling no punches regarding his use of a textual no less than visual language, Donkor is repeatedly playing with word games and puns as he admits, "The title deploys a pun on the word 'wrecks' and simultaneously refers to the continuing reign of the twentieth-first century monarch."<sup>22</sup> Shoring up his critique, Donkor's *UK Diaspora* renders these parallels explicit in a far smaller work, *I Give You* (Figure 6). Here he works solely with British coins to forego the verisimilitude of a painterly or photographic likeness in order to create an abstract-figurative rendering of the profile of Elizabeth II. According to his reimagining, this contemporary monarch's iconic emblems of wealth, empire, and nationhood – her crown and jewelry – are rendered in brown-colored coins of little value while her skin tone comes to life via silver coins of far greater monetary weight. For Donkor, white western freedoms remain dually predicated upon a widespread whitewashing of national histories and upon contemporary slavery as political and historical heir to the transatlantic triangular trade.

A self-reflexively experimental work, Donkor's insertion of visual references to contemporary representations of Elizabeth I in *Elizabeth Rex Lives* are among many powerful revisions he makes to Hilliard's original portrait. These include his substitution of pearls with pins that not only puncture the body of the canvas but physically pierce the body of the queen: their metallic sheen suggests both sacrificial martyrdom in wounding but resistance struggles in revolutionary activism via a contemporary resonance to bullets, an association exacerbated by his use of a scattering of blood-colored pins. Defiantly rejecting the status of the original painting as a reified white Western art object, Donkor replaces the ornate golden chain around Elizabeth's neck with interlocking black and gold safety pins. At the same

time, he contests the symbolism of her veil as an emblem of virginal purity by replacing its delicate white strands with black chains which exist in visual call and response relation to *Ran Away by George*, a work in which he similarly indicts national mythologies of moral innocence. By far his most radical interventions, however, include his decision to manipulate Queen Elizabeth I's physiognomy to suggest facial similarities not only with Queen Elizabeth II – and thereby indict contemporary injustices enacted by monarchical rule - but with Margaret Thatcher - in his critique of twentieth and twenty-first century white British conservatism, racism, and anti-immigration policies. Staggeringly, he seemingly defaces his own canvas not only by piercing the work with nails and pins but by disfiguring Elizabeth I's excessively whitened skin: scratch beneath the surface and Elizabeth I's barbaric inhumanity and direct complicity in the corporeal and psychological subjugation of black diasporic peoples during transatlantic slavery is hauntingly exposed. Intent upon animating his mixed-media assemblage yet further, Donkor's *Elizabeth Rex Lives* was the catalyst to his performance, *The Final Pin-Up*, held at Tate Britain in 2009. "This authorised, but unadvertised, performance took place in the gallery and was open for museum visitors to attend," he explains, summarizing as follows:

The score demanded the following actions: I placed *Elizabeth Rex Lives* (UK Diaspora) on an easel, next to the Hilliard painting in Tate Britain; I then explained to the audience that the artist's work had been created in response to Queen Elizabeth's I role in financing and profiteering from the slave trading voyages of Sir John Hawkins; I proposed that audience members attach to the canvas a necklace that I had made from safety pins; Given that Hawkins had deported his victims to Hispaniola (which includes Haiti), participants were to simultaneously chant the slogan 'Liberty or Death', which was the slogan of Haiti's slave revolution of 1791; A number of audience members then pierced the canvas with the safety pins, chanting 'Liberty or

Death'; *Elizabeth Rex Lives* was then returned to the artist's collection, including the newly attached necklace.<sup>23</sup>

Simultaneously asking his audience to inhabit the role of the artist – as they are invited to contribute to the aesthetic process - and to assume the role of a black diasporic revolutionary – by declaring “Liberty or Death” – Donkor lays claim to the indivisible relationship between arts of representation and acts of resistance. Across *UK Diaspora*, he vouchsafes his belief that a black diasporic quest for political and historical “retribution” for white atrocities can only ever be realized by the promise for “spiritual and intellectual reparation” held out by art-making itself.<sup>24</sup>

Any such radical performances and multilayered symbolism are by no means the whole story with regard to *Elizabeth Rex Lives* in light of this portrait's emotively charged relationship to *Arise Sir John* and *Drake-U-Liar*. Shedding further light upon his decision to insert chains and safety pins into *Elizabeth Rex Lives*, Donkor's portrait of John Hawkins substitutes his ornate jewelry with barbed wire onto which he paints a now seemingly bloodied hand while he punctures his forehead with a nail in an act of artistic as well as physical execution: he emblazons “HAWKINS” in capitalized lettering in a powerful substitution of the delicately rendered and diminutive original text in an unequivocal naming and shaming of his involvement in the transatlantic trade. Committing no less violent acts to Drake's iconography, at the same time that he renders his complicity in the trade viscerally tangible by replacing the red and green of his cape with red and green banknotes while he includes graffittied handwritten text that reads “Drake U Liar” in a direct pun on “Dracula” and in an act of physical defacement - for which read radical editorialization - Donkor stabs this historical figure to the heart with a nail. More revealingly still, Donkor overlays the body of the slaveholder with a metonymic signifier of the body of the slave as a black chain cuts across his body and eventually connects up to a spherical object onto which Drake rests his hand in proprietorial ownership and which, as per the original painting, is a globe in hagiographic celebration of white conquest. As per Donkor's reimagining, however, this symbol is recreated to function as a critique

of any such whitewashed glorifications of history as he substitutes the globe's geographical symbolism in favor of the insertion of blood-red capitalized lettering onto a physical no place which reads, "BLACK HISTORY MONTH." For Donkor, the white European quest for territorial aggrandizement and capital gain throughout transatlantic slavery has its corollary in western art history's acts of cultural ghettoization and eradication of black artistic production in a contemporary era.

A bold departure from his other mixed-media paintings in *UK Diaspora*, Donkor includes no portrait of an iconic white western monarchical ruler or a historical individual in *Cape Coast Castle Deeds* but rather, as he explains, "presents a mis-en-scene, in which Akan and English forces are trading" and as represented by "Chad Valley TM toy soldiers, manufactured as racialised 'black' and 'white' figurines" all "purchased at Woolworth's in Brixton, South London" (Figure 7).<sup>25</sup> As a work which occupies the geographical terrain of Scotland with regards to its positioning in this mixed-media assemblage, he is most likely commenting upon the centuries' long African and European transatlantic slave trade at the same time as indicting English atrocities by exposing historic and contemporary Scottish independence struggles. A multilayered work, his foreground comes to life via the plastic figures of armed black and white toy soldiers as juxtaposed with black bodies constructed from jelly babies and packed into a toy dingy in imitation of historical diagrams of slave ship holds. Donkor's decision to include black jelly babies literally references sugar and the plantation economy while also symbolically associating black bodies with consumption and annihilation: a view further reinforced by the fact that the black jelly babies have since become discolored with age and thereby assume a range of tonalities in symbolic recognition of the contemporary trafficking of diverse peoples of all nationalities across the world. Shoring up the similarities between historic and contemporary atrocities, his background consists of a "digital montage of the artist's 2007 photograph of Cape Coast Castle in Ghana and an eighteenth-century engraving of the court of the Dahomian King Tegbesu."<sup>26</sup> Refusing to sanitize class no less than race divides, Donkor directly comes to grips with African complicity in the trade in his determination to represent the "King of Dahomey" as he insists it "wasn't simply a European and American" but also an

“African” generated trade as “ruling elites” across racial and national boundaries engaged in the trade “for their own aggrandisement.”<sup>27</sup>

Ultimately betraying more similarities than differences with *Ran Away by George*, Donkor revisits the use of the eighteenth-century newspaper advertisement in *Cape Coast Castle* by working with a “montage” in which he “includes extracts from two articles in *The Times*. One, from Jan 1792 - just after the start of the Haitian Revolution - advertises Africans for sale. The other, from just after Haitian independence in Jan 1804, demands an end to the deportation of Africans to the Americas on the grounds that they represent a political/military threat.”<sup>28</sup> While the first article advertises the sale of a “SUGAR PLANTATION” in which “Negroes, Cattle, and Horses” are available for purchase, the second acknowledges the “complete victory” of “the Blacks” in “Saint Domingo” only to warn white audiences that their success “places the commercial powers of Europe in a situation entirely new” in light of the fact that, “the State may become sufficiently powerful to annoy its neighbours; and may afford an example too encouraging to the Negroes in our plantations.” For Donkor, this second article reinforces his determination to “explode the mythology about what the abolition act was about” by emphasizing that white soi-disant philanthropy was “contrary to humanitarian gesture” as he lays bare his conviction, “Britain’s imminent decision to outlaw the slave trade took account of strategic as well as humanitarian considerations.”<sup>29</sup> Refusing to retain the role of detached observer, Donkor provides “a stamp of authenticity” by referring to “my journey, my experience” not only via his inclusion of his photograph of Cape Coast Castle and decision to include Ghanaian sand but due to his prominent collaging of his own ticket – “Ghana Museums and Monuments Board Fee Charged for Visiting Admit Bearer \$45,000 No.54212” – by which he further destabilizes the authority of seemingly dispassionate yet unapologetically white-centered journalism. Donkor’s collaging techniques here and elsewhere within *UK Diaspora* testify to his rejection of the “notion of high status and of great value that’s given to painting and to works on canvas” in comparison to the expendability of black life.<sup>30</sup> A compelling source of dramatic tension within Donkor’s *UK Diaspora*, *Cape Coast Castle* exists in powerful call and response

relation to *Slaving Celebs*, a diminutive work significantly located in Plymouth, John Hawkins' geographical location (Figure 8). To the fore is a rogues' gallery of white slave-trading figures as he includes a series of digitally reworked portraits of Daniel Defoe, Thomas Guy, Sir Isaac Newton, and Henry Compton, each of whom "participated in the mass enslavement of Africans, particularly through their investments in the South Sea Company" and for which "Each portrait is branded with the sitter's initials - reflecting the SS (South Sea) brand which they had invested in."<sup>31</sup> He establishes close thematic connections to the rest of *UK Diaspora* not only by attaching numerous black chains as signifiers of enslavement – and as included in his reworkings of iconic portraits such as *Ran Away by George* and *Elizabeth Rex Lives* - but, and in a direct evocation of *Cape Coast Castle*, by attaching another toy boat crammed with black jelly babies which floats on the artist's 2006 photograph of Cuban waters. No longer black but brown, green, and even partially whitened, as he observes, the "jelly babies" in this work have similarly "become discoloured with age" as they thereby reinforce his indictment of transatlantic slavery's powerful afterlife in the contemporary trafficking of multi-racial bodies.<sup>32</sup>

"I respect the viewer who goes to the gallery and wants to experience something that is uplifting or disturbing, that engages them intellectually," Kimathi Donkor declares, conceding, "I am not just trying to put them into a dream-like reverie. If you look at my paintings, they have got a very complex psychological and even spiritual element. I don't think of them as being easy to read, they are difficult images."<sup>33</sup> Anti-didactic, anti-explicatory, and anti-sensationalist, Donkor's *UK Diaspora* vouchsafes his commitment to creating multi-layered, cerebral, and, above all, self-reflexively experimental and "difficult images" in order to extrapolate the physical and psychological realities of black subjects circulating as absent-presences and present-absences within a dominant iconographic lexicon. Operating under the conviction that, "[w]henever artists make a work, they are entering into the stream of our history," Donkor's *UK Diaspora* testifies to his self-conscious positioning as an artist who is "using history as a material" with the specific aim of mapping the "long history of trafficking people across the Atlantic and the liberation struggles that ensues."<sup>34</sup> Rejecting the widespread whitewashing of black



histories, memories, and narratives within mainstream Western art history, Donkor stages both historical and aesthetic interventions into dominant genres, motifs, and icons in a bid to wrest control over extant processes of signification and endorse an alternative visual language. At the same time that Tessa Jackson and Grant Watson emphasize Donkor's determination to "expose the injustices that still fracture our society" by creating works that are "unashamedly affirmative and political," his mixed-media assemblages and paintings attest to his conviction that, "All artists not only work with history but with the history of art."<sup>35</sup> Regardless of his commitment to "transforming oppression into beauty and art," Donkor refuses to lose sight of the injustices that stem from the "beauty of the painting which we worship" but for which "[we] cannot see that there is so much suffering involved in its creation."<sup>36</sup> Creating allegorical, mythical, and symbolically-weighted bodies of work in which he engages in direct visual conversation with dominant iconography, for Donkor "[i]t is not about condemning this art, but to somehow question it" as he foregrounds black authority and artistry regardless of white forces of subjugation and annihilation.<sup>37</sup> A tour de force, Donkor's *UK Diaspora* bears witness to his radical commitment to "the representation of memory, identity and agency" as he establishes an revisionist iconography within which to do justice to the "notion of agency whereby people who might be under the most terrible circumstances just make a decision to change."<sup>38</sup> While the history of transatlantic slavery may remain "a story not to be passed on," as Donkor bears witness in his self-reflexive juxtapositions, artful layerings, and philosophical interventions, the image of transatlantic slavery retains a powerful afterlife no less than afterdeath as the catalyst to movements, motifs, and experimental practices within twentieth and twenty-first century black diasporic art histories.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview of Kimathi Donkor by the author, April 2014. For a further in-depth examination of Donkor's paintings and mixed-media assemblages see Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Imaging Resistance: Representing the Body, Memory, and History in Fifty Years of African American and Black British Art 1960-2010* (forthcoming University of California Press).

<sup>2</sup> Donkor engages in powerful ways with Western art traditions of history painting as dramatically to the forces across his *Toussaint L'Ouverture* and *Queens of the Undead* series, among many others.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline Menezes, "Retelling history through art: an interview with Kimathi Donkor." *Studio International*, December 5 2012: n.p. Available online:  
<http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/retelling-history-through-art-an-interview-with-kimathi-donkor>

<sup>4</sup> Interview of Donkor by the author.

<sup>5</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (rpt. New York: Vintage, 2004): 275.

<sup>6</sup> Qtd. in Menezes, "Retelling history," n.p.

<sup>7</sup> Interview of Donkor by the author.

<sup>8</sup> Eddie Chambers "Reading the Riot Act," *Visual Culture in Britain*, (vol. 14, no. 2 2013): 253.

<sup>9</sup> Lara Pawson, "Kimathi Donkor," *Frieze*, August 8 2013, n. p. Available online:  
<http://www.frieze.com/shows/review/kimathi-donkor/>

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<sup>10</sup> Coline Milliard, “Kimathi Donkor: ‘Queens of the Undead.’” *Artinfo UK*, November 2 2012, n.p.

Available online: <http://uk.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/838143/review-kimathi-donkor-queens-of-the-undead>

<sup>11</sup> Philip James Kaisary, *The Literary Impact of the Haitian Revolution*, Ph. D. Diss. (University of Warwick, 2008): 271-72.

<sup>12</sup> See Robert Farris Thompson, “Illuminating Spirits: A Review” and “David Hammons: ‘Knowing Their Past’” in *Aesthetics of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2011): 106-109; 92-105.

<sup>13</sup> Kimathi Donkor, “UK Diaspora: Artist’s iconographical notes,” n.d, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Interview of Donkor by the author.

<sup>15</sup> A transcript of this runaway slave advertisement as originally published in *Maryland Gazette* (August 20, 1761) is reproduced online:

<http://www.marhawashington.us/items/show/93>

<sup>16</sup> Donkor, “UK Diaspora: Artist’s iconographical notes,” n.d., 2.

<sup>17</sup> Interview of Donkor by the author.

<sup>18</sup> Interview of Donkor by the author; Donkor, “UK Diaspora: Artist’s iconographical notes,” n.d., 1.

<sup>19</sup> Interview of Donkor by the author.

<sup>20</sup> Donkor, “UK Diaspora: Artist’s iconographical notes,” n.d., 2; interview of Donkor by the author.

<sup>21</sup> Interview of Donkor by the author.

<sup>22</sup> Donkor, “UK Diaspora: Artist’s iconographical notes,” n.d, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Interview of Donkor by the author.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>26</sup> Donkor, “UK Diaspora: Artist’s iconographical notes,” n.d, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Interview of Donkor by the author.

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- <sup>28</sup> Donkor, “UK Diaspora: Artist’s iconographical notes,” n.d., 3.
- <sup>29</sup> Interview of Donkor by the author.; Donkor, “UK Diaspora: Artist’s iconographical notes,” n.d., 3.
- <sup>30</sup> Interview of Donkor by the author.
- <sup>31</sup> Donkor, “UK Diaspora: Artist’s iconographical notes,” n.d., 3.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Qtd. in Menezes, “Retelling history,” n.p.
- <sup>34</sup> Qtd. in Menezes, “Retelling history,” n.p.; interview of Donkor by the author.
- <sup>35</sup> Tessa Jackson and Grant Watson, “Introduction,” *Kimathi Donor: Queens of the Undead* (London: International Institute for Visual Arts, 2012) 4; qtd. in Menezes, “Retelling history,” n.p.
- <sup>36</sup> Interview of Donkor by the author; qtd. in Menezes, “Retelling history,” n.p.
- <sup>37</sup> Qtd. in Menezes, “Retelling history,” n.p.
- <sup>38</sup> Qtd. in Carol Tulloch, “Take a look at it from my point of view,” in *Kimathi Donor: Queens of the Undead* (London: International Institute for Visual Arts, 2012) 13; qtd. in Menezes, “Retelling history,” n.p.